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Alive...Buried...Buried Alive:

A Reading of Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights as Template of Feminist Overture.

Abstract: This paper proposes *Wuthering Heights* as a fiery attempt at feminist proposition. The point this paper attempts to make is that, temporally precursor to even the First Wave of Feminism, *Wuthering Heights* as a novel pivots around one whopping big metaphor of 'burial' to project forth feminist tendencies towards liberation—the word itself presupposing the idea of bondage—liberation for women in the socio-legally sanctified prison house for women called marriage. Here, the oppressiveness of the asphyxiation of being ensnared in the stranglehold of an unfulfilling marriage, as in the cases of Cathy or Isabella in the novel, gets epitomised through the metaphor of the grave which in turn, draws heavily from the nineteenth century widespread trend of Taphephobia. Therefore efforts at escaping the confines of the grave becomes the allegory for efforts at breaking free of the constraints of a very Victorian notion of nuptial existence that often left women trapped in a buried-alive kind of state. The titular mise en scène, *Wuthering Heights*, with its dank, dark, stony and stifling interiors, comes to epitomise the closed, damp, dark underground of the grave. Thus as Cathy first, and then many fictional twists in the tale later, Isabella, try to escape from *Wuthering Heights*, it

strikes one as escape from the hellish contours of a death-like existence in that grave-like oppressive dwelling. The metaphor comes to a head when Heathcliff, in Chapter 29, literally tries to disinter Cathy's body from her grave, raising questions as to whether he could possibly have been the liberating agent for Cathy.

This paper will try to unearth how beneath the veneer of the gothic *Unheimlich*, the novel runs a subcutaneous thread of feminist thought that gets imaged cleverly but inostensibly through the plethora of gothic figurative paraphernalia.

Keywords: *Gothic Fiction, feminist, buried-alive, Taphephobia, Unheimlich*

1847. The world came to know of one tempestuous novel called *Wuthering Heights* written by one elusive Ellis Bell. In spite of making ripples in the reader circle, the novel came to garner not-so-pleasant sobriquets like 'A fiend of a book'.

The brooding darkness of the novel gained it pride of place as of one of the most classic exempla of Gothic Fiction. Stalwarts like Ellen Moers have vouched for the fact.

Every time I go through *Wuthering Heights*, I am struck by the dark, brooding ambience that Emily Brontë, tucked away in one cold damp corner of Yorkshire, creates in the book. Apart from the self-destructive raging passion that rules the roost pulls the strings of the fate of the two pivotal characters, Heathcliff and Catherine, the novel swivels on a number of images that give the book its signature Gothic feel.

Right at the outset, as Lockwood ventures into *Wuthering Heights* on a stormy night that macrocosmically reflects the ever festering turbulence that haunts the soul of all the creatures in the novel, he describes the dark, dank insides of *Wuthering Heights* as if it were a stupendous grave where the "floor was of smooth, white stone; the chairs, high-backed, primitive structures...: one or two heavy black ones lurking in the shade". A tad earlier as he had entered the portals of this weather-beaten mansion, he had marvelled at the "quantity of grotesque

carving lavished over the front, and especially about the principal door; above which, among a wilderness of crumbling griffins and shameless little boys, ... (he) detected the date '1500' ...” leaving ample scope for the likeliness of this being the entrance to a vault of death to cross a rapt reader's mind.

A while later, as Lockwood glances out of the window to consider his chances of returning to Thrushcross Grange that evening, all he sees is “A sorrowful sight ...: dark night coming down prematurely, and sky and hills mingled in one bitter whirl of wind and suffocating snow.” The word ‘suffocating’ only nails what was being hinted so far.

As luck would have it, he had to spend the night in Wuthering Heights. The bed allotted to him again, makes the asphyxiating image of a grave resurface:

“a large oak case, with squares cut out near the top resembling coachwindows. Having approached this structure, I looked inside, and perceived it to be a singular sort of old fashioned couch, very conveniently designed to obviate the necessity for every member of the family having a room to himself. In fact, it formed a little closet, and the ledge of a window, which it enclosed, served as a table. I slid back the panelled sides, got in with my light, pulled them together again, and felt secure against the vigilance of Heathcliff, and every one else.”

The novel brings the burial metaphor to an apogee in Chapter XXIX When Heathcliff gets Cathy buried with one side of her coffin ripped apart, as though affording the dead soul a whiff of respite from the closed claustrophobia of the grave. The burial image gains a shuddery twist a bit later in the book, When Heathcliff—the intense, devil-may-care maverick that he was, paid to exhume Cathy out of her grave—even if it was just to hold the emaciated remains close once more—in an unnerving gesture of tempestuous love that would have allowed Cathy the freedom of a thousand doves had Heathcliff and Cathy been united in life.

Three months after Heathcliff's death, in Chapter XXXII, the same Wuthering Heights where junior Cathy had been kept almost a hostage prisoner by the ruthless Heathcliff, takes on a look

that has nothing to do with the stifled asphyxiation of yore, as Cathy leads a free life with Hareton. Not much of the grave-like gloom and deathly oppressive depression remains :

“Before I arrived in sight of it, all that remained of day was a beamless amber light along the west: but I could see every pebble on the path, and every blade of grass, by that splendid moon. I had neither to climb the gate nor to knock - it yielded to my hand. That is an improvement, I thought. And I noticed another, by the aid of my nostrils; a fragrance of stocks and wallflowers wafted on the air from amongst the homely fruit- trees.

Both doors and lattices were open...”

The novel thus pivots around the *idée fixe* of the grave as metaphor for stifled existence. Notably enough, the metaphor of the grave surfaces repeatedly in context to the life-in-death sort of existence led by the women of the novel—be it Catherine or Isabella or Cathy. These living creatures were reduced to helpless, nondescript lives that left them with no freedom of speech, action, decision, legal or social rights. These people were reduced to living a ‘buried-alive’ existence, where they were clinically alive indeed, but as good as dead from the social, legal or political point of view.

The image of being buried alive as a symbolic construct could have hit Emily Bronte’s mind as this actually was a raging phobia of the day. Taphephobia, originating etymologically from Greek - taphos, meaning "grave, tomb" and phobos, meaning "fear" was a well-talked of topic in the mid-nineteenth century. The psychopathological fear of being buried alive in a grave as a fallout of being mistakenly pronounced dead was in the buzz in the mid nineteenth century as tabloids and newspapers came out day after day with news of people waking up to horrific asphyxiation in their graves. This happened as the medical sciences of the nineteenth century was still unadept in ascertaining clinical death.

Beginning in the late 18th century, the fear became more widespread and peaked into an apogee in the 1890's, when Italian psychiatrist Enrico Morselli gave it a name: Taphephobia. Later on,

in 1905, reformer William Tebb compiled 219 accounts of near-live burial, 149 of actual live burials, and 10 cases of accidental live dissection on the autopsy table.

Emily Bronte—all of 29 while writing out her novel—could have found it difficult to resist weaving in the latest concern with taphephobia into the matrix of her fiction as metaphorical abstraction and thus, tactfully uses the metaphor of Taphephobia to outline the horror of living the ‘buried-alive’ existence that a Victorian marriage could land a woman up in, thereby bringing her essence to that of an almost non-existent cipher—something that Frances E. Dolan significantly calls ‘the spectre of the erased, dead or zero wife...’ (The word ‘cipher’ is the Arabic word for ‘zero’ and means a symbol that denotes ‘no amount’ but is used to occupy vacant space .(OED)

Sigmund Freud, in 1919, wrote about the fear of being buried alive in his essay on the uncanny. Continuing from what he stated in *Totem and Taboo* (1912-13), Freud noted how taphephobia often grips the human mind in a stranglehold of fear :

To some people the idea of being buried alive by mistake is the most uncanny thing of all. And yet psycho-analysis has taught us that this terrifying phantasy is only a transformation of another phantasy which had originally nothing terrifying about it at all, but was qualified by a certain lasciviousness – the phantasy, I mean, of intra-uterine existence (Freud 241)

In literature, there were a lot of writings that brought around the spectral image of being buried alive as a metaphorical state of the woman’s position in marriage, thereby accentuating what Peter Buse and Andrew Scott call ‘the persistence of the trope of spectrality in culture’.

In 1662, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, wrote ‘Female Orations’...and earned many an infamous sobriquet like ‘mad, conceited, and ridiculous’. In her work, Mad Madge – as she was called by many in her times—spoke at length about the buried-alive state of women in marriage:

... men are so unconscionable and cruel against us, as they endeavour to bar us of all sorts and kinds of liberty, so as not to suffer us freely to associate amongst our own sex, but would fain bury us in their houses or beds, as in a grave; the truth is, we live like bats or owls, labour like beasts, and die like worms.(Cavendish)

The text clearly compares the domestic and sexual spaces of men's houses and 'their' beds – which are strictly under male ownership to 'graves'. This metaphor of being potentially buried alive—as suggested by the very transitive verb 'bury'—is cleverly augmented by the images of bats and owls—all nocturnal creatures associated with graveyards, and worms—again underground creatures associated with corpses and decay.

Again, in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft reiterated the 'buried-alive' status of women.

Although, *prima facie*, the pivotal metaphor for women's position in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is that of slavery, 'in a political and civil sense', in the dedication to M. Talleyrand Perigord, Late Bishop of Autun, Wollstonecraft evokes the buried-alive image when she iterates that 'when you force all women, by denying them civil and political rights,' ...they 'remain immured in their families groping in the dark'.(Wollstonecraft 286)

Later, in *Maria or, The Wrongs of Woman*, the unfinished fictional sequel to *Vindication* that Wollstonecraft crafted in 1798, the 'uried-alive' trope surfaces again:

Abodes of horror have frequently been described, and castles, filled with spectres and chimeras, conjured up by the magic spell of genius to harrow the soul and absorb the wondering mind. But, formed of such stuff as dreams are made of, what were they to the mansion of despair, in one corner of which Maria sat20

Further down in the novel, Maria herself clarifies the same taphephobic image: 'Marriage had bastilled me for life,' declares Maria (115), who loses her property, her home and her child and is 'buried alive' (135) in the sickhouse that is her 'home'.

Emily Bronte, when she describes Wuthering Heights during Cathy's captivity of sorts there, evokes the same trope of being buried alive as she uses evocative and suggestive descriptions of the house as a stupendous grave—a crypt where Cathy or Isabella suffer the asphyxiation of an unfulfilling, futile marriage that was slowly choking the life out of them. The same house, as shown earlier in this article, takes on cheerier tones after Heathcliff, the captor-tormentor is dead—thereby ending the life-in-death compulsion for the women.

On the other hand, for the flighty, tempestuous Catherine Linton, marriage to the quiet, frigid Linton had suffocated her into the buried alive stance. Then Heathcliff does those terrible things like ripping a part of her coffin open, or exhuming her body out of the grave.

Continuing with the 'buried-alive' metaphor, Heathcliff's actions could well be construed as insinuation of his intended plans to free Catherine from her suffocating marriage to Linton.

In *Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy* (2008), Frances E. Dolan takes up three common figures for marriage in the early modern period: the Christian model of the couple as 'one flesh' but (in seeming contradiction) with the husband as 'head'; the 'legal fiction' of common law coverture whereby the husband subsumed his wife; and the comic tradition of two separate but equal individuals battling for mastery. She shows how all these models are fraught with contradictions and conflicts *per se*.

William Blackstone in his seminal work, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–9), which is rather considered the standard textbook for trainee lawyers says:

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything ...

If this notion of socio-legal erasure for women through ‘the very being or legal existence of the woman’ being ‘suspended during marriage’ is to be taken into account, then it all the more accentuates the fact that in the nineteenth century, married women were ‘civilly dead’.

The metaphor of ‘burial’, then, is a very powerful way of mapping the erasure of the female self—the femme covert—within a construct of marriage which only allowed the legal existence of one person – the husband.

Emily Bronte was bringing up the burial image again and again. But history kept calling it a wonderful show of the Gothic—the excitingly chilling exemplum of the ‘*Unheimlich*’. But what was always running quietly underneath the veneer of the Gothic was a strong undercurrent of feminist thought, though the First Wave Feminism as a movement was still some more years away.

Now that we mention it, even Charlotte’s novels—be it the precocious ‘Reader, I married him.’ by Jane in *Jane Eyre* or the self-reliant independence of Frances Evans Henri in *The Professor* or the able administrative mien of Shirley in *Shirley*, the strain of feminist thought that vouched for existential agency for women was always there. In Anne Bronte’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Helen Graham had walked out of a marriage with Arthur Huntingdon that had gone horribly wrong and fended for herself and her son by painting for a living.

Thus to wind up, this paper proposes that alongside citing Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* as one of the greatest exempla of horror, the reader starts calling the author Emily Bronte an avantgarde feminist too.

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